DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 750 CS 204 795

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TITLE Components of a Successful Interdisciplinary Composition Program.
PUB DATE Dec 78
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association of America (93rd, New York, New York, December 27-30, 1978); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Core Curriculum; *General Education; Higher Education; *Integrated Activities; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Teaching Procedures; Team Teaching

ABSTRACT

The teachers involved in the general education program in Boston University's College of Basic Studies have developed a cooperative approach to composition instruction that they consider a useful model of structure, cooperation, and experience for others in interdisciplinary teaching systems to follow. Their instructional approach contains these components: the form and content of written assignments are planned jointly by the rhetoric and content instructors; both instructors devote class time to identifying their expectations not only as teachers but also as the students' audiences in science, social science, humanities, or psychology; rhetoric classes are devoted to developing the writing skills pertinent to the assignment; the students meet the rhetoric instructor in conference to have their rough drafts critiqued; and, finally, the students prepare a revised copy of their papers for the content instructor's evaluation. A marked improvement from rough draft grade to final grade illustrates the effectiveness of the revisionary process. Both the students and the teachers express satisfaction with this interdisciplinary approach to composition instruction. (Examples of assignment sheets and evaluation forms are appended.) (RL)

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Components of a Successful Interdisciplinary Composition Program

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With serious interest in interdisciplinary composition growing,[1] teachers and administrators of Freshman English will have use for models in designing programs or to suggest exploratory initiatives with other departments. After working together as a teaching team, the authors of this article--instructors in science, social science, humanities, psychology, and rhetoric--believe that we have a useful model of structure, cooperation, and experience to offer.[2]

The setting of our experience was the College of Basic Studies of Boston University, a two-year, non-degree, general education program designed mainly for students who fail to meet admissions standards of other schools and colleges of the University.[3] The mission of the College is to train its students in reading, writing, and study skills so that they might transfer to a degree-granting program of the University in their junior year and complete it successfully. The College has accomplished its mission for twenty-five years, due largely to a core curriculum, a team system for grouping students and instructors, and to the type of cooperative endeavor described here.[4]

But no matter what the setting, effective interdisciplinary efforts in composition will always derive from content area and rhetoric instructors sitting down to work together. The process we have followed has several components, which are more or less applicable to different settings: the form and content of the written assignment are planned by the rhetoric and content instructors; both hold a class to make the expectations of the assign-

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ment explicit and to discuss the general expectations of the audience the content instructor represents, i.e., audiences in science, social science, humanities, or psychology; rhetoric classes are devoted to developing the skills pertinent to the assignment; the students meet the rhetoric instructor in conference to have their rough drafts criticized; and, finally, the students prepare a revised copy of their papers for the content instructor's evaluation.

The first step is the most crucial component of this process, not only because an ill-conceived, poorly-written, or misleading assignment will result in student frustration and unsuccessful performance, but also because both instructors must explicitly understand how the assignment relates to the widest rhetorical context so that both might be better able to teach generally applicable skills and thought processes. The most common and thus most important thought process is analysis and most fields have formalized that process through organizational headings in their written work, such as Review of Past Research, Hypothesis, Findings, Discussion, and Conclusion. Such formalism is pedagogically and philosophically advantageous, because organizational headings isolate the need for specific rhetorical skills and provide a concrete argument that expository writing, unlike creative writing, normally avoids experimentation with form. The student also is introduced to precise audience expectations and learns to disassociate his content and rhetoric instructors from the rigorous demands of the form. In other words, the student learns that his instructors represent audiences and that, consequently, their criticism is at its best when general, disinterested, professional. Often, to impress upon the students that they are being taught to do more than please one of us, we refer to style manuals in science, social science, and humanities. The science instructor of our group, for example, a geologist by training, refers students to Suggestions to Authors of the Reports of the U. S. Geological Survey, while the social

science instructor, a social psychologist, prepares model papers for class discussion based upon the style manual of the American Psychological Association.

Some of the assignments we have designed reflect the excitement as well as the pragmatism of an interdisciplinary composition program. In 1976-77 we began the year with a two-page paper in science requiring that the student devise an experimental plan to determine if Vitamin C prevents colds (cf. Appendix A). The students were prepared for this assignment by analysis of hypothetical experiments that contain bias and control problems; the object of the student's endeavor was to design a study that eliminated those problems. Rhetorical skills appropriate to this assignment are rudimentary thesis formation ("I hypothesize that due to x, y, and z, Vitamin C will/will not be an effective cold preventative"); description (the student has to describe previous methodology and then his own); and classification, or simple analysis (problems of preceding experiments have to be categorized and interpreted under the headings of bias and control). Paper two was an analytic assignment in social science that required the student to formulate an extended hypothesis about his peers on their attitudes towards success, religion, drugs, sex, or politics. The student was then confronted with data drawn from a questionnaire distributed earlier in the year to all freshmen at the College. His task was to describe the results and to account for their support, qualification, or refutation of his original hypothesis (cf. Appendix B). The rhetorical skills necessary for this assignment are an advanced form of thesis formation, the ability to select only data relevant to the point, and the thought processes of cause and effect and analysis. Moving then from challenging, but essentially straightforward, analytical assignments, paper three was a comparison/contrast in humanities

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THEME EVALUATION FORM

TITLE: Descriptive of Content (yes-no)

INTRODUCTION: Good Improvement Needed Points:____of 2

STRUCTURE: General to Specific; length

CONTENT: Background Material; Audience Appeal; Introduction to Works to be Analyzed; Statement of significance; Other (e.g., definition); CLEAR THESIS.

BODY: Good Improvement Needed Points:____of 4

STRUCTURE: Arrangement of Parts; Proportion Among Parts; Transition Between Parts: Other

CONTENT: FULFILLMENT OF THESIS: Examples (number of, choice of, description of); Persuasiveness of Interpretation (yes-no); Discussion Sections; Other (e.g., Character Description where required, etc.)

CONCLUSION: Good Improvement Needed Points:____of 2

STRUCTURE: Specific to General; Length

CONTENT: Summary Statement or Return to Thesis; Return to Background or Audience Concerns that Opened Paper; Further Commentary on Significance, What is Still to be Considered; Other

* *

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS Points:____of 2

STYLE: Word Choice, Variety of Sentence Patterns, Tone, Metaphors, Figures

OVERALL IMPRESSION

* *

Total Points:____of 10

* *

DEBITS:

GRAMMATICAL ERRORS: Fragments; Run-ons; Agreements (subject-verb, pronoun-antecedent); Tenses; Modifiers (dangling or misplaced); Other

MECHANICAL ERRORS: Punctuation; Spelling; Neatness; Other

Points Deducted:_____

GRADE OR FINAL POINT TOTAL_____

COMMENTARY:

that required the students to compare the anti-hero of Pinter's The Birthday Party with the narrator of E. B. White's "The Door" in their response to the problems of human consciousness. Because comparison/contrast is essentially the development of parallel analyses, this assignment further developed the student's analytical skills while requiring that careful selection of examples be made to address the analyses to common points. The fourth and final assignment of the semester was in psychology. Students were asked to account for the behavior of a character in a case study or in a very short story, Joyce's "Eveline," using humanistic and psychoanalytic theories. Again, analytical skills were of primary importance and comparison and contrast was taken to a higher level of development with the need to apply varied concepts to the same behavior for the purpose of, finally, deciding which theory applied best (cf. Appendix C).

In addition to designing assignments and establishing rhetorical direction for their successful execution, a second function of the session(s) between the content and rhetoric instructors is to develop an evaluative tool that will objectify the expectations of form and content. Because two instructors will be reading and evaluating the student's work, the need for identifying specific expectations becomes critical, or, at least, more apparently critical (it would be difficult to defend vagueness of expectations on any grounds, but one does not often feel vague when working alone). We have found that theme evaluation forms[5] significantly reduce student tensions about the possibility of serving two masters, produce better papers, and make us more effective critics.

/cf. Evaluation Form/

The theme evaluation form is straightforward, explicit, prescriptive in part, perhaps open to the charge of being reductive. Reductivism is the lesser risk, however, in the teaching of freshman composition; we think there is greater risk in penalizing the student for not meeting unstated expectations. Students can never seem to remember that papers require introductions that function to introduce, not begin the analysis; that a thesis must be included in the introduction (preferably at the end) to establish the descriptive and interpretative parameters of the analysis; that examples must be described before they are interpreted in relationship to the thesis; that matters such as arrangement and proportion of parts of the analysis are crucial to positive reader reaction; and that a conclusion is not the last paragraph of the analysis, but a formal entity, more nearly a reflection of the introduction. Our students have expressed almost unanimous approval of such rating devices, probably because they provide a detailed analysis for composing and then for guiding revision.[6] The student can compare the evaluation he received from the rhetoric instructor on his draft with the final evaluation he receives from the content instructor. For example, on his draft he might have received only one point for his introduction because it lacked a thesis, or because he constructed a non-thesis such as "In this paper I will analyze A, B, and C." Or perhaps his introduction moved from the specific to the general, lacked a sense of the topic's significance, was one-third the length of the paper, etc., and he lost a half point (admittedly, the relationship of point value to introductory components is arbitrary, but its concreteness is effective in focusing the student's attention on faults that matter); but, if he corrects those faults, his introduction will receive a higher evaluation, because, in fact, it will be better. Such a rating scheme also makes it possible for the rhetoric instructor to measure the

effectiveness of his commentary in helping students to improve. If the student receives a 4 out of 10 on his draft, revises in keeping with critical commentary, and receives an 8 out of 10 from the content instructor, it becomes very clear to the student that revision in light of rhetorical principles is very important, and the rhetoric instructor will find that his honesty is appreciated, because, in fact, his criticism was effective.

The grades received by the students on the humanities assignment mentioned above--comparing the responses of Stanley Webber from The Birthday Party and the narrator of "The Door" to the problem of human consciousness--are presented in the table below to illustrate the effectiveness of the revisionary process using the Theme Evaluation Form.

FINAL GRADE FOR REVISED WORK

ROUGH DRAFT GRADES	A	B	C	D	F		ROUGH DRAFT TOTALS BY GRADE
A	4	1				5 A	
B	5	1				6 B	
C	3	5	6			14 C	
D	5	3	9	2		19 D	
F	5	11	20	14	4	54 F	
Final Paper Totals	22	21	35	16	4	98	Total Papers
	A	B	C	D	F		

The most important fact to be gleaned from this table is that while 74% of the students submitted below average work as rough drafts (19 D's, 54 F's), only 20% (or 16 D's, 4 F's) were still at that level after revision. And even of those, most had improved significantly, from scores of one and two points to 6 or 6½ points out of ten. The F group is the most interesting: 5 F's became A's; 11 became B's; and 20 became C's. The greatest percentage of A's, however, came

from the D and B groups. Twenty-six percent of those who received D's on their drafts ultimately received A's; and, 83% of those who received B's finally got A's. In short, while one can see that the process may appear to be far from perfect from the students' point of view (note that 25% did not show great improvement in grades although they showed great improvement in point totals), it does function effectively for most students in materially improving their work, even on a very demanding assignment.

To close this brief description of our program and results, we would like to report our students' reaction to interdisciplinary composition and finally to add personal comments that reflect our particular interest in interdisciplinary composition and that might recommend it to others from our fields. Eighty-seven percent of the students responded positively to the question, "Have you been satisfied with the team approach to rhetoric?" A sample of their commentary follows:

> I think this team approach was very effective. It was really helpful in helping me with my first college papers. When you reach college a different type of writing is asked for, and very few people are prepared for it. The help from Rhetoric was really necessary.

> For the most part I have been very satisfied with the team approach, because I have been out of school for some time. I feel that writing for different audiences with emphasis on the different criteria of each have been very helpful.

> Sometimes I feel like we're being treated like children, but when the papers and tests come along, I realize I'm learning a lot. I think we get very much out of the team teaching.

I have been very satisfied with this approach to rhetoric because I believe that the only way to learn writing is to write. And the experience gained from writing for audiences that I was not used to writing for will, I believe, prove useful in the future.

Yes, I have been satisfied with this team approach to rhetoric. The idea that our work would be commented on before it must be formally done helped me to improve the paper only because I had immediate feed back. Instead of improvement from one paper to another, room for improvement was between rough draft and actual paper, which I feel helped.

Our responses are these:

Science: Most students who enter college today do not write well, and most fail to realize that in writing for a science audience they may face a more rigorous review of their written work than in many other disciplines. Hence, this interdisciplinary writing project was especially rewarding to me since I received expert assistance in the difficult and time-consuming job of teaching college freshmen how to write for a science audience. The papers were of a generally higher quality than those I usually receive, and the higher grades which they received reinforced the idea that well-written work receives higher rewards. The interdisciplinary nature of the project reinforced the important idea that writing well is as important in science as in English or rhetoric courses.

Psychology: The psychology project described here resulted in an unusually satisfying group of student papers and in a greater appreciation on my part of the difficulty involved in creating a good writing assignment.

Working with a colleague who was not a psychologist made it necessary for me to [~~think and~~] describe with greater clarity the sometimes fuzzy concepts that get masked by jargon. Translating jargon into English is almost invariably worthwhile in itself. In this sense, my colleague served as a critic and co-author of my assignment before serving as a critic of our students' first draft attempts to fulfill the assignment. His role was that of a two-way facilitator and clarifier of written communication between instructor and student, which is helpful to both. I would also like to add that the ability to develop clear and challenging writing assignments does not come naturally. The interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of writing described here had the added benefit of providing me with expert consultation which was quite useful and, I think, instructive for future writing assignments that I make.

Social Science: When I started teaching Social Science to freshmen at the College of Basic Studies, I resolved to make writing an integral part of the course work. The quality of prose in the first essay examination almost made me give up. Ungrammatical sentences, chopped-up sentence fragments masquerading as vehicles for communicating thoughts, not to speak of the lack of organization and development in presentation, made evaluation of written work a wholly irritating chore. It became apparent that if I wanted these students to write a term paper later on that semester, I must either teach them how to do it or be prepared to accept a massive number of failures. At that point the Rhetoric professor came to my rescue. He offered the idea of a joint Social Science/Rhetoric paper on a topic suitable to my course, where he would take on the responsibility of teaching such requisite skills as library research,

note-taking, outlining, paper organizing, referencing, and would then critique the students' work before final submission of papers to me. This was an offer I could not refuse, and the resulting papers were very satisfactory.

Humanities: Clearly, any written assignment should challenge but not defeat the student. Working with a rhetoric teacher, I was able to assess more clearly what could be expected of students based on a comprehensive review of their writing experiences in other departments. Also, the evaluation sheet as vital to the project. It clearly demonstrated to students that form is a universal problem in writing, and that it is not just a requirement of English teachers. Also, the evaluation sheet provided students with the sense that it is possible to substantiate a final grade on the basis of cumulation of points within discrete and finite parts of a paper. Students ended up finding out why their writing succeeded or failed to communicate instead of spending time arguing about B minuses or C pluses. It is interesting too that no student ever received a lower final grade than his rough draft had been given.

Rhetoric: Working with colleagues outside of one's field is a genuine educational experience; working with students as their advocate, rather than as their judge, makes the rhetoric instructor an ally in their early, anxiety-filled writing experiences. Thus, interdisciplinary rhetoric is humanely satisfying. But the most important reason for such a program is the pedagogical one. No one can reasonably expect that most freshmen will be able to write college-level papers without rhetorical guidance, and who else but the rhetoric instructor can or should assist the students in coming to understand diverse audience expectations on the college level, not abstractly, but concretely on work they have to do today? Northrop Frye recently charged that "educational theory

. . . has become . . . solipsistic, . . . ignoring what the community as a whole needs and requires." One could not make that charge against the program and experience we have described, and that, it seems to us, is of fundamental moral and pedagogical significance.

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Notes

[1] In addition to the increasing number of CCCC sessions devoted to interdisciplinary composition, out of which has come a national newsletter, Moving Out, edited by Angela Dorenkamp of Assumption College, Worcester, MA, the NEH has granted almost a million dollars to programs seeking to move composition into the curriculum at large. See the NEH News, No. 18, no date.

[2] Of the ~~two~~ five co-authors of this paper, only two will be employed by Boston University at the time of publication.

[3] The average verbal scores for College of Basic Studies freshmen in 1976-77 was 430.

[4] For a complete description of the CBS program and its impressive record in working with low-achieving students, see Charles P. Fogg and Gene M. Smith, "A Non-Traditional Approach Which Successfully Serves Marginal Applicants," Perspectives, 7(Spring 1976), 86-99.

[5] The Theme Evaluation Form presented here evolved from the earlier forms of Professors Harry H. Crosby and James M. Wilcox of the Rhetoric Division of the College of Basic Studies.

[6] The principal author of this paper has been using the Theme Evaluation Form with the same results and success at the College of the Holy Cross, which had in 1977-78 a highly motivated, well-prepared freshman class, with verbal board scores averaging 575.

APPENDIX A

SCIENCE/RHETORIC PAPER

TOPIC: An Experimental Plan to Determine if Vitamin C Prevents Colds.

CONTENT: Ponticaro Orange Growers' Experiments 1 and 2 and your plan for a third experiment.

FORM: The paper should have these parts: introduction to the problem; analysis of past research; procedure for future experimentation to include rationale for each recommended improvement.

The style of the paper should conform to the "Suggestions As to Expression" handout to be discussed in Rhetoric.

The manuscript should have your name, section, and date in the upper left hand corner of the first page; title three spaces below; and, the beginning of the text two spaces below the title. Double space the text. Leave margins of one inch on left and right. On the second page, type your last name in the upper left hand corner and the page number in the upper right. Finally, do not use onion skin paper. If you hand write the paper, use every other line and keep track of length. Number of pages needed to reach required length will depend on your writing.

LENGTH: Two typed pages or 600 words.

WEIGHT: Fifty points in rhetoric (ten points for the draft and forty points from the science grade); weight towards the science grade to be announced.

DUE: October 1, to Professor Davis. The rough draft is to be submitted also.

APPENDIX B

SOCIAL SCIENCE/RHETORIC PAPER

TOPIC: Freshman Student Survey Analysis

CONTENT: The "Student Survey" and appropriate theory.

FORM: This paper will have four parts:

I. Theoretical section, to include an hypothesis drawn from theory which can be tested by the results of the survey;

II. Methods, or Data Collection section, information for which will be provided by Professor Erkut;

III. Results section, in table form; and,

IV. Discussion section, which relates results to hypothesis and theory.

The manuscript should have your name, section, and date in the upper left hand corner of the first page; title three spaces below; and, the beginning of the text three spaces below the title. Double space the text. Leave margins of one inch on left and right. On the second and succeeding pages, type your last name in the upper left hand corner and the page number in the upper right. Finally, do not use onion skin paper. If you hand-write the paper, use every other line and keep track of length.

LENGTH: Three typed pages, or 750 words.

WEIGHT: Seventy points in rhetoric (five points for pre-assignment; five points for draft; sixty points from social science grade); weight towards social science grade to be announced.

DUE: A legible rough draft is due Friday, October 8; the final manuscript

is due October 18 to Social Science. Leave your rough draft in your box by 12:30 Friday. If your paper is illegible and sloppy, I won't take it.

. . . . . .

Suggestions:

1. To form a good hypothesis, scan the factual part of the survey for items that may have a bearing on your attitude question. For example, if you were dealing with attitude questions 50 and 51, on big business and labor unions, factual questions, 7, 12, 21, 34, 37, and 39 might have a bearing on defining your population and subsequently forming an economic hypothesis about that population that would bear on its attitudes towards big business and labor.

2. The paper might have more promising results if you would choose a series of related attitude questions, rather than just one. You would then be making complementary hypotheses based on your theory and you would have the opportunity of testing the consistency of your population's attitudes and values.

3. Incidentally, the factual questions are numbers 1-41 on your survey; the attitudinal questions are 42-60.

APPENDIX C

PSYCHOLOGY/RHETORIC PAPER

TOPIC: Analysis of Psychological Conflict and Behavior: "Eveline"

CONTENT: Joyce's "Eveline" culminates in a dramatic dilemma--to go or to stay. Her decision may have life-long consequences. Write an essay analyzing Eveline's psychological conflict, the stress it causes, and the way she handles this stress. In your analysis, focus on the following issues or questions, using concepts and understanding you have gained from your psychology course.

1. Explication of the conflict:
   A. What are Eveline's conflicting goals?
   B. Explain the gradual change in Eveline's thoughts, feelings, and actions in terms of gradients of approach and avoidance (i.e., change in levels of approach and avoidance tendencies as one gets closer to the goal). You will have to be mindful of the specific positive and negative factors she weights in relationship to the changes in feeling she undergoes.
2. Significance of the conflict:
   Discuss the meaning of Evenline's conflict--to leave or to stay--from the perspectives of both psychoanalytic and humanistic theory.
3. Resolution of the conflict:
   A. Has Eveline resolved her conflict at the end of the story? Explain. If you think she has resolved her conflict, is it a healthy resolution?

B. Imagine Eveline's thoughts and feelings and actions, if appropriate, as the boat leaves the port. Compose a paragraph to conclude the story from the viewpoint of your understanding of Eveline's resolution.

FORM: Analytic, to be discussed further in rhetoric classes.

LENGTH: 750-1250 words (3-5 typed pages).

DUE: Draft to Rhetoric - 12 April; returned by 22 April*

Due to Psychology: 29 April

*The draft will be worth 20 points in rhetoric.